THE FAIRY FLEET.

BY GEORGE MACDONALD.

THERE is no getting James to write anything himself. When I urge him, he laughs, and says—because we like him the public is not therefore to be bored. He wouldn't mind lining a trunk, though, he says; for he remembers inside the lid of the first he ever had, certain pages of a novel, which having of course read, they swelled so in his head, that he dreamed over and over again he had found the rest of the sheets, after going through wonderful adventures in an old country house in search of them. To this day, however, not knowing the title of the book, he has never discovered what happened to Don Pedro after his horse stood up on his hind legs, nor how Lady Emmeline got on in the haunted chamber in which she was shut up by her cruel guardian. I expect, though, that he will one day rush into the house with three volumes, covered with wall-paper and backed with chintz, in his hands, and a *eureka* on his lips.—To business, though, now.

One evening, lately, while we were all sitting as usual in Lizzie's room, James appeared at the door, covered with snow.

"Just look out, Jane," he said.

I lifted a corner of the blind; the snow was falling thick. It was so large-flaked and lovely that I was sorry it had to stop upon a miry street, instead of a forest or hill-side.

"Oh, Lizzie," said Maria, "the old woman in the moon is plucking such great geese!"

"When I lived in Scotland," said my mother, "the little children used to say when it snowed, that the fairies were baking their bread."

"Ah! James," said Lizzie, "do tell us a fairy tale. This is just the night for one."

"It is not so easy to tell a fairy tale off-hand," returned James. "But I have had pieces of one floating about in my head the last day or two, and if Jane will just sit down and play *Sehnen und Fragen*, I will fit them together."

I lingered over the music, playing slowly. And by the time I had played it twice through, James was ready. So we all drew round the fire, taking care that Lizzie should see James and mamma and the fire. Then we put the candles out, and James began.

"Once upon a time," he said, "there lived—let me see where—in a valley in Scotland, a boy about twelve years of age, the son of a shepherd. His mother was dead, and he had no sister or brother. His father was out all day on the hills with his sheep; but when he came home at night, he was as sure of finding the cottage neat and clean, the floor swept, a bright fire, and his supper waiting for him, as if he had had wife and daughter to look after his household, instead of only a boy. Therefore, although Colin could only read and write, and knew nothing of figures, he was ten times wiser, and more capable of learning anything, than if he had been at school all his days. He was never at a loss when anything had to be done. Somehow, he always blundered into the straight road to his end, while another would be putting on his shoes to look for it. And yet all the time that he was busiest working, he was busiest building castles in the air. I think the two ought always to go together.

"And as Colin was never over-worked, but had plenty of time to himself, in winter he spent it in reading by the fireside, or carving pieces of wood with his pocket-knife; and in summer he always went out for a ramble. His great

delight was in a little stream which ran down the valley from the mountains above. Up this *burn* he would wander every afternoon, with his hands in his pockets. He never got far, however—he was so absorbed in watching its antics. Sometimes he would sit on a rock, staring at the water as it hurried through the stones, scolding, expostulating, muttering, and always having its own way. Sometimes he would stop by a deep pool, and watch the crimson-spotted trouts, darting about as if their thoughts and not their tails sent them where they wanted to go. And when he stopped at the little cascade, tumbling smooth and shining over a hollowed rock, he seldom got beyond it.

"But there was one thing which always troubled him. It was, that when the stream came near the cottage, it could find no other way than through the little yard where stood the cowhouse and the pigsty; and there, not finding a suitable channel, spread abroad in a disconsolate manner, becoming rather a puddle than a brook, all defiled with the treading of the cloven feet of the cow and the pigs. In fact, it looked quite lost and ruined; so that even after it had, with much labor, got out of the yard again, it took a long time to gather itself together, and not quite succeeding, slipped away as if ashamed, with spent forces and poverty-stricken speed; till at length, meeting the friendly help of a rivulet coming straight from the hills, it gathered heart and bounded on afresh.

"'It can't be all that the cow drinks that makes the difference,' said Colin to himself. 'The pigs don't care about it. I do believe it's affronted at being dashed about. The cow isn't dirty, but she's rather stupid and inconsiderate. The pigs are dirty. Something must be done. Let me see.'

"He reconnoitred the whole ground. Upon the other side of the house all was rock, through which he could not cut; and he was forced to the conclusion that the only other course for the stream to take lay right through the cottage.

"To most engineers this would have appeared the one

course to be avoided; but Colin's heart danced at the thought of having his dear *burn* running right through the house. How cool it would be all the summer! How convenient for cooking; and how handy at meals! And then the music of it! How it would tell him stories, and sing him to sleep at night! What a companion it would be when his father was away! And then he could bathe in it when he liked. In winter—ah!—to be sure! But winter was a long way off.

"The very next day his father went to the fair. So Colin set to work at once.

"It was not such a very difficult undertaking; for the walls of the cottage, and the floor as well, were of clay—the former nearly sun-dried into a brick, and the latter trampled hard; but still both assailable by pickaxe and spade. He cut through the walls, and dug a channel along the floor, letting in stones in the bottom and sides. After it got out of the cottage and through the small garden in front, it should find its own way to the channel below, for here the hill was very steep.

"The same evening his father came home.

"'What have you been about, Colin?' he asked, in great surprise, when he saw the trench in the floor.

"'Wait a minute, father,' said Colin, 'till I have got your supper, and then I'll tell you.'

"So when his father was seated at the table, Colin darted out, and hurrying up to the stream, broke through the bank just in the place whence a natural hollow led straight to the cottage. The stream dashed out like a wild creature from a cage, faster than he could follow, and shot through the wall of the cottage. His father gave a shout; and when Colin went in, he found him sitting with his spoon half way to his mouth, and his eyes fixed on the muddy water which rushed foaming through his floor.

"'It will soon be clean, father,' said Colin, 'and then it will be so nice!'

"His father made no answer, but continued staring. Colin went on with a long list of the advantages of having a brook running through your house. At length his father smiled and said:—

"'You are a curious creature, Colin. But why shouldn't you have your fancies as well as older people? We'll try it awhile, and then we'll see about it.'

"The fact was, Colin's father had often thought what a lonely life the boy's was. And it seemed hard to take from him any pleasure he could have. So out rushed Colin at the front, to see how the brook would take the shortest way headlong down the hill to its old channel. And to see it go tumbling down that hill was a sight worth living for.

"It is a mercy,' said Colin, 'it has no neck to break, or it would break twenty times in a minute. It flings itself from rock to rock right down, just as I should like to do, if it weren't for my neck.'

"All that evening he was out and in without a moment's rest; now up to the beginning of the cut, now following the stream down to the cottage; then through the cottage, and out again at the front door to see it dart across the garden, and dash itself down the hill.

"At length his father told him he must go to bed. He took one more peep at the water, which was running quite clear now, and obeyed. His father followed him presently.

"The bed was about a couple of yards from the edge of the brook. And as Colin was always first up in the morning, he slept at the front of the bed. So he lay for some time gazing at the faint glimmer of the water in the dull red light from the sod-covered fire, and listening to its sweet music as it hurried through to the night again, till its murmur changed into a lullaby, and sung him fast asleep.

"Soon he found that he was coming awake again. He was lying listening to the sound of the busy stream. But it had gathered more sounds since he went to sleep—amongst the rest one of boards knockiug together, and a tiny

chattering and sweet laughter, like the tinkling of heather-bells. He opened his eyes. The moon was shining along the brook, lighting the smoky rafters above with its reflection from the water, which had been dammed back at its outlet from the cottage, so that it lay bank-full and level with the floor. But its surface was hardly to be seen, save by an occasional glimmer, for the crowded boats of a fairy fleet which had just arrived. The sailors were as busy as sailors could be, mooring along the banks, or running their boats high and dry on the shore. Some had little sails which glimmered white in the moonshine—half-lowered, or blowing out in the light breeze that crept down the course of the stream. Some were pulling about through the rest, oars flashing, tiny voices calling, tiny feet running, tiny hands hauling at ropes that ran through blocks of shining ivory. On the shore stood groups of fairy ladies in all colors of the rainbow, green predominating, waited upon by gentlemen all in green, but with red and yellow feathers in their caps. The queen had landed on the side next to Colin, and in a few minutes more twenty dances were going at once along the shores of the fairy river. And there lay great Colin's face, just above the bed-clothes, *glowering* at them like an ogre.

"At last, after a few dances, he heard a clear, sweet, ringing voice say—

"'I've had enough of this. I'm tired of doing like the big people. Let's have a game of Hey Cockolorum Jig!'

"That instant every group sprung asunder, and every fairy began a frolic on his own account. They scattered all over the cottage, and Colin lost sight of both of them.

"While he lay watching the antics of two of those near him, who behaved more like clowns at a fair than the gentlemen they had been a little while before, he heard a voice close to his ear; but though he looked everywhere about his pillow, he could see nothing. The voice stopped the moment he began to look, but began again as soon as he gave it up.

"'You can't see me. I'm talking to you through a hole in the head of your bed.'

"Colin knew the knot-hole well enough.

"'Don't look,' said the voice. 'If the queen sees me I shall be pinched. Oh, please don't.'

"The voice sounded as if its owner would cry presently. So Colin took good care not to look. It went on:

"'Please, I am a little girl, not a fairy. The queen stole me the minute I was born, seven years ago, and I can't get away. I don't like the fairies. They are so silly. And they never grow any wiser. I grow wiser every year. I want to get back to my own people. They won't let me. They make me play at being somebody else all night long, and sleep all day. That's what they do themselves. And I should so like to be myself. The queen says that's not the way to be happy at all; but I do want very much to be a little girl. Do take me.'

"'How am I to get you?' asked Colin in a whisper, which sounded, after the sweet voice of the changeling, like the wind in a field of dry beans.

"'The queen is so pleased with you that she is sure to offer you something. Choose me. Here she comes.'

"Immediately he heard another voice, shriller and stronger, in front of him; and, looking about, saw standing on the edge of the bed a lovely little creature, with a crown glittering with jewels, and a rush for a sceptre in her hand, the blossom of which shone like a bunch of garnets.

"'You great staring creature!' she said. 'Your eyes are much too big to see with. What clumsy hobgoblins you thick folk are!'

"So saying she laïd her wand across Colin's eyes.

"Now, then, stupid!' she said; and that instant Colin saw the room like a huge barn, full of creatures about two feet high. The beams overhead were crowded with fairies, playing all imaginable tricks, scrambling everywhere, knocking each other over, throwing dust and soot in each other's

faces, grinning from behind corners, dropping on each other's necks, and tripping up each other's heels. Two had got hold of an empty egg-shell, and coming behind one sitting on the edge of the table, and laughing at some one on the floor, tumbled it right over him, so that he was lost in the cavernous hollow. But the lady-fairies mingled in none of these rough pranks. Their tricks were always graceful, and they had more to say than to do.

"But the moment the queen had laid her wand across his eyes, she went on:

"'Know, son of a human mortal, that thou hast pleased a queen of the fairies. Lady as I am over the elements, I cannot have everything I desire. One thing thou hast given me. Years have I longed for a path down this rivulet to the ocean below. Your horrid farm-yard, ever since your great-grandfather built this cottage, was the one obstacle. For we fairies hate dirt, not only in houses, but in fields and woods as well, and above all in running streams. But I can't talk like this any longer. I tell you what, you are a dear good boy, and you shall have what you please. Ask me for anything you like.'

"'May it please your majesty,' said Colin, very deliberately, 'I want a little girl that you carried away some seven years ago the moment she was born. May it please your majesty, I want her.'

"'It does not please my majesty,' cried the queen, whose face had been growing very black. 'Ask for something else.'

"'Then, whether it pleases your majesty or not,' said Colin, bravely, 'I hold your majesty to your word. I want that little girl, and that little girl I *will* have, and nothing else.'

"'You dare to talk so to me, you thick!'

"'Yes, your majesty.'

"'Then you sha'n't have her.'

"'Then I'll turn the brook right through the dunghill,'

said Colin. 'Do you think I'll let you come into my cottage to play at high jinks when you please, if you behave to me like this?'

"And Colin sat up in bed, and looked the queen in the face. And as he did so he caught sight of the loveliest little creature peeping around the corner at the foot of the bed. And he knew she was the little girl, because she was quiet, and looked frightened, and was sucking her thumb.

"Then the queen, seeing with whom she had to deal, and knowing that queens in Fairyland are bound by their word, began to try another plan with him. She put on her sweetest manner and looks; and as she did so the little face at the foot of the bed grew more troubled, and the little head shook itself, and the little thumb dropped out of the little mouth.

"'Dear Colin,' said the queen, 'you shall have the girl. But you must do something for me first.'

"The little girl shook her head as fast as ever she could, but Colin was taken up with the queen.

"'To be sure I will. What is it?' he said.

"And so he was bound by a new bargain, and was in the queen's power.

"'You must fetch me a bottle of Carasoyn,' said she.

"'What is that?' asked Colin.

"'A kind of wine that makes people happy.'

"'Why, are you not happy already?'

"'No, Colin,' answered the queen, with a sigh.

"'You have everything you want.'

"'Except the Carasoyn,' returned the queen.

"'You do whatever you like, and go wherever you please.'

"'That's just it. I want something that I neither like nor please—that I don't know anything about. I want a bottle of Carasoyn.'

"And here she cried like a spoilt child, not like a sorrowful woman.

"'But how am I to get it?'

"'I don't know. You must find out.'

"'Oh! that's not fair,' cried Colin.

"But the queen burst into a fit of laughter that sounded like the bells of a hundred frolicking sheep, and bounding away to the side of the river, jumped on board of her boat. And like a swarm of bees gathered the courtiers and sailors; two creeping out of the bellows, one at the nozzle and the other at the valve; three out of the basket-hilt of the broad-sword on the wall; six all white out of the meal-tub; and so from all parts of the cottage to the river-side. And amongst them Colin spied the little girl creeping on board the queen's boat, with her pinafore to her eyes; and the queen was shaking her fist at her. In five minutes more they had all scrambled into the boats, and the whole fleet was in motion down the stream. In another moment the cottage was empty, and everything had returned to its usual size.

"'They'll be all dashed to pieces on the rocks,' cried Colin, jumping up, and running into the garden. When he reached the fall, there was nothing to be seen but the swift plunge and rush of the broken water in the moonlight. He thought he heard cries and shouts coming up from below, and fancied he could distinguish the sobs of the little maiden whom he had so foolishly lost. But the sounds might be only those of the water, for to the different voices of a running stream there is no end. He followed its course all the way to its old channel, but saw nothing to indicate any disaster. Then he crept back to his bed, where he lay thinking what a fool he had been, till he cried himself to sleep over the little girl who would never grow into a woman.

"In the morning, however, his courage had returned; for the word Carasoyn was always saying itself in his brain.

"'People in fairy stories,' he said, 'always find what they want. Why should not I find this Carasoyn? It does not seem likely. But the world doesn't go round by *likely*. So I will try.'

"But how was he to begin?

"When Colin did not know what to do, he always did something. So as soon as his father was gone to the hill, he wandered up the stream down which the fairies had come.

"'But I needn't go on so,' he said, 'for if the Carasoyn grew in the fairies' country, the queen would know how to get it.'

"All at once he remembered how he had lost himself on the moor when he was a little boy; and had gone into a hut and found there an old woman spinning. And she had told him such stories! and shown him the way home. So he thought she might be able to help him now; for he remembered that she was very old then, and must be older and still wiser now. And he resolved to go and look for the hut, and ask the old woman what he was to do.

"So he left the stream, and climbed the hill, and soon came upon a desolate moor. The sun was clouded and the wind was cold, and everything looked dreary. And there was no sign of a hut anywhere. He wandered on, looking for it; and all at once found that he had forgotten the way back. At the same instant he saw the hut right before him. And then he remembered it was when he had lost himself that he saw it the former time.

"'It seems the way to find some things is to lose yourself,' said he to himself.

"He went up to the cottage, which was like a large beehive built of turf, and knocked at the door.

"'Come in, Colin,' said a voice; and he entered, stooping low.

"The old woman sat by a little fire, spinning, after the old fashion, with a distaff and spindle. She stopped the moment he went in.

"'Come and sit down by the fire,' she said, 'and tell me what you want.'

"Then Colin saw that she had no eyes.

"'I am very sorry you are blind,' he said.

"'Never you mind that, my dear. I see more than you do for all my blindness. Tell me what you want, and I shall see at least what I can do for you.'

"'How do you know I want anything?' asked Colin.

"'Now that's what I don't like,' said the old woman. 'Why do you waste words? Words should not be wasted any more than crumbs.'

"'I beg your pardon;' returned Colin. 'I will tell you all about it.'

"And so he told her the whole story.

"'Oh those children! those children!' said the old woman. 'They are always doing some mischief. They never know how to enjoy themselves without hurting somebody or other. I really must give that queen a bit of my mind. Well, my dear, I like you; and I will tell you what must be done. You shall carry the silly queen her bottle of Carasoyn. But she won't like it when she gets it, I can tell her. That's my business, however.—First of all, Colin, you must dream three days without sleeping. Next, you must work three days without dreaming. And last, you must work and dream three days together.'

"'How am I to do all that?'

"'I will help you all I can, but a great deal will depend on yourself. In the meantime you must have something to eat.'

"So saying, she rose, and going to a corner behind her bed, returned with a large golden-colored egg in her hand. This she laid on the hearth, and covered over with hot ashes. She then chatted away to Colin about his father, and the sheep, and the cow, and the housework, and showed that she knew all about him. At length she drew the ashes off the egg, and put it on a plate.

"'It shines like silver now,' said Colin.

"'That is a sign it is quite done,' said she, and set it before him.

"Colin had never tasted anything half so nice. And he had never seen such a quantity of meat in an egg. Before he had finished it he had made a hearty meal. But, in the meantime, the old woman said—

"'Shall I tell you a story while yon have your dinner?'

"'Oh, yes, please do,' answered Colin. 'You told me such stories before?'

"'Jenny,' said the old woman, 'my wool is all done. Get me some more.'

"And from behind the bed out came a sober-colored, but large and beautifully-shaped hen. She walked sedately across the floor, putting down her feet daintily, like a prim matron as she was, and stopping by the door, gave a *cluck, cluck*.

"'Oh, the door is shut, is it?' said the old woman.

"'Let me open it,' said Colin.

"'Do, my dear.'

"'What are all those white things?' he asked; for the cottage stood in the middle of a great bed of grass with white tops.

"'Those are my sheep,' said the old woman. 'You will see.'

"Into the grass Jenny walked, and stretching up her neck, gathered the white woolly stuff in her beak. When she had as much as she could hold, she came back and dropped it on the floor; then picked the seeds out and swallowed them, and went back for more. The old woman took the wool, and fastening it on her distaff, began to spin, giving the spindle a twirl, and then dropping it and drawing out the thread from the distaff. But as soon as the spindle began to twirl, it began to sparkle all the colors of the rainbow, that it was a delight to see. And the hands of the woman, instead of being old and wrinkled, were young and long-fingered and fair, and they drew out the wool, and the spindle spun and flashed, and the hen kept going out and in, bringing wool and swallowing the seeds, and the old woman kept telling Colin one story after another, till he

thought he could sit there all his life and listen. Sometimes it seemed the spindle that was flashing them, and sometimes the long fingers that were spinning them, and sometimes the hen that was gathering them off the heads of the long dry grass and bringing them in her beak and laying them down on the floor.

"All at once the spindle grew slower, and gradually ceased turning; the fingers stopped drawing out the thread, the hen retreated behind the bed, and the voice of the blind woman was silent.

"'I suppose it is time for me to go,' said Colin.

"'Yes, it is,' answered his hostess.

"'Please tell me, then, how I am to dream three days without sleeping.'

"'That's over,' said the old woman. 'You've just finished that part. I told you I would help you all I could.'

"'Have I been here three days, then?' asked Colin, in astonishment.

"'And nights too. And I and Jenny and the spindle are quite tired and want to sleep. Jenny has got three eggs to lay besides. Make haste, my boy.'

"'Please, then, tell me what I am to do next.'

"'Jenny will put you in the way. When you come where you are going, you will tell them that the old woman with the spindle desires them to lift Cumberbone Crag a yard higher, and to send a flue under Stonestarvit Moss. Jenny, show Colin the way.'

"Jenny came out with a surly *cluck*, and led him a good way across the heath by a path only a hen could have found. But she turned suddenly and walked home again.

"Colin could just perceive something suggestive of a track, which he followed till the sun went down. Then he saw a dim light before him, keeping his eye upon which, he came at last to a smithy, where, looking in at the open door, he saw a huge, humpbacked smith working a forehammer in each hand.